



STATE REPRESENTATIVE
CORY MASON

WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY
66TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT
REPRESENTING THE RACINE COMMUNITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Rep. Cory Mason (608) 266-0634

March 17, 2015

Guest column by Representative Cory Mason

To print week of March 16, 2015

Transparency in the Capitol Needed

Open Government. Everyone says they are for it. To illustrate the importance of openness and transparency in government in curbing corruption, in 1933 Supreme Court Justice Brandeis observed, “Sunlight is said to be the best disinfectant.”

This week is Sunshine Week, where we celebrate the virtue of open government in our democracy and reflect upon where we could make government more open and transparent. It is part of a national initiative to dialogue about the importance of openness in government. As part of Sunshine Week, I am again introducing a bill that would apply the open meetings law—a foundation of democratic government—to the closed-door meetings in the Legislature.

On days the Legislature is in session, both parties in both houses of the Legislature split into partisan groups to discuss the day’s calendar. It is in these meetings that most of the real legislative debate occurs. Members suss out their positions, cajole people to a point of view, and build consensus. We employ shuttle diplomacy, devise strategy, and argue passionately for our respective positions. In other words, it’s where the action and debate happens.

In and of itself, this is a useful exercise. It lets members pose questions to each other, discuss possible amendments, and ensures that legislators are better informed before they create new public policy.

The objectionable part, in my view, is that under the law Legislators are allowed to regularly close these meetings to public view.

Under Wisconsin’s Open Meeting Law, citizens have the right to watch the deliberations of Government at any level. At the local level, the Legislature has mandated under the open meetings law that deliberations in your local city council or school board must be open to the public. However, the Legislature exempts itself from this same law when we go into our closed-

door session meetings. The public, the press, Legislative staff, and anyone who is not a state Legislator has to leave the room.

An important part of being a member of the Legislature is to debate in public view legislation that may become law. When we are at our best, Legislators listen to the views of colleagues from other parts of the state and even from the other party. When the Legislature consistently closes its meetings to the public, the actual deliberation of legislation and its likely outcome is predetermined behind closed doors, obscuring it from public view and depriving the Legislature of genuine debate.

The State of Wisconsin calls us to represent our constituents and debate, sometimes passionately, about legislation that will become law and change how people live their lives and operate their businesses. The very least we can do is open *all* of our debate to public view.

Cory Mason (D—Racine) represents the 66th Assembly District.